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ABSTRACT

A partnership between the College of Education of the University of South Carolina, the Salkehatchie Consortium of schools, International Business Machines, and families and schools in Allendale, South Carolina, and Estill, Denmark was formed in an effort to implement a project designed to enhance the school success of at-risk elementary school students. Goals of the project were to: (1) increase the language, mathematics, expressive communication, and social responsibility skills of young at-risk children by strengthening the school curriculum; (2) develop a systematic approach to extending the key concepts curriculum into the home; and (3) implement the curriculum in school and home in ways that would increase children's school success and parents' self-confidence, improve parent-child relationships, and strengthen teachers' roles as classroom leaders and facilitators between school and home. Indications of the project's success can be seen in the areas of training, curriculum development, home-school involvement, innovative uses of computer technolgy, and collaboration between university, school, and community. The long-term goal of the Teacher-Parent Partnership Project is to create a system by means of which schools can introduce the concept of "school-family learning practices" at the beginning of the child's educational experience. (RH)

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A RURAL TEACHER-PARENT PARTNERSHIP TO ENHANCE SCHOOL SUCCESS

A special presentation for the Southern Rural Education Association, Atlanta, Georgia (April 19, 1990)

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STRENGTHENING THE TEACHER-PARENT PARTNERSHIP: Focus On At-Risk Families

Kevin J. Swick
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The College of Education of the University of South Carolina, the Salkehatchie Consortium of schools, IBM, families and schools in Estill, Denmark, and Allendale, South Carolina are engaged in a unique partnership that aims to enhance "at-risk" children's school success. **The project** (initiated in September, 1989) **is supported by a grant from the U.S. Office of Educations's FIRST program (Family And Schools Program).** Three rural schools (Estill Elementary, Allendale Primary, and Denmark/Olar Primary) are serving as the pilot centers for the initial program work. 75 Chapter I eligible five and six year old children, along with their teachers and families are involved. The USC Children's Center is serving as the research, development, and demonstration site for the project.

The basic premise of the project is that **by strengthening teacher and parent skills and support resources as well as their partnership, at-risk children's school functioning will be improved.** Three goals provide the direction for the project: to increase the language, mathematics, expressive communication, and social responsibility skills of young at-risk children through strengthening the school curriculum and extending it into the home; to develop a systematic approach to extending the "key concepts curriculum" into the home; and to implement the curriculum (in school and home-based settings) in ways that increases children's school success, increases parent self-confidence and improvess their relationships with their children, and strengthens the teacher's roles as classroom leader and school-home facilitator.

Key indicators of the project's success reside within the following areas: training, curriculum development, home-school involvement, innovative uses of computer technology, and university-school-community collaboration.

Training

At the center of the project's design is a comprehensive training program in which teachers, home-school-workers, and parents are acquiring a variety of skills to strengthen their individual and collaborative efforts in supporting children's learning in school and at home. **Training sessions held with participating teachers include:** selecting and developing the key concepts curriculum, developing and using home learning extension strategies, parent involvement skills, and utilizing computers to teach key concepts skills. **Parent education** has been a significant part of the project. Utilizing flexibly scheduled group sessions along with individual support (via parenting tapes and home visits) parents have received training on topics such as **the family curriculum, how children learn behavior, how children learn about their feelings, learning about math and language, and learning how to use computers.** In addition, home-school-workers are carrying out parent education on an individual basis through in-school and home-visit activities.

Home-school-workers (one in each school) are the key initiators of the school-family partnership development process. They have engaged in training sessions in which they explored various strategies for extending the school curriculum into the home, involving parents in training programs, strengthening the teacher-parent partnership, supporting children's learning in school and at home, and strengthening parent-child relationships. **In particular, home-school-workers have addressed the many dimensions of utilizing non-traditional strategies to involve parents who typically have not been a part of the school's educational efforts.**

Curriculum Development

Teachers and home-school-workers have been involved in organizing the "key concepts curriculum" for use in the classroom and for extension into the home learning environment. Utilizing existing curricula within each school, staff have refined their approach by organizing content and process into "concepts to be learned" within each of the major areas of language, mathematics, expressive communication, and social responsibility skills. New concepts, materials, and strategies have been added as a result of teacher sharing and the development workshops. **A significant outcome of the curriculum development work has been teacher collaboration on strategies and resources to use in strengthening their individual classroom programs.** The organization of home learning extension centers (places in each school where parents and children can borrow learning materials on key concepts being taught in the classroom) has also stimulated a great deal of teacher innovation and "re-thinking" of how they approach certain concepts and skills.

Home-School Involvement

Building strong schools and families and developing mutually beneficial relationships between the two is a continuing goal of the project. Training experiences, organization of the project, and the resources and strategies used in the project support this goal. Teachers and home-school-workers have collaborated on using strategies such as conferences, home-visits, home learning activities, parent training programs, informal contacts, a parenting-tape library, home learning extension centers, and in-classroom involvement to foster strong school-family involvement. Each school has a teacher-parent advisory team to guide the program's implementation in their school. At this point in the implementation process parent involvement has been very high (70% participation in parent programs and 90% percent participation in home-visits, as examples). Involvement areas currently under going more complete development are the home learning centers, home learning activities, and conferencing. The removal of barriers such as transportation to the school, child care, and access to materials when one is unable to attend parenting sessions has increased the effectiveness of the project greatly.

Innovative Uses Of Computer Technology

Computer technology is permeating all of the life functions of society. In an effort to promote computer literacy among at-risk children and their families, computer training and instruction has been integrated into all components. Fully equipped IBM PS 25's have been placed in several classrooms at each site. Teachers and home-school-workers have received training on using the computers and on integrating their use in the teaching of the key concepts curriculum. Parent training sessions (as well as individualized parent contacts) combined with a computer-loan program is succeeding in increasing the computer literacy skills of everyone involved in the

project.

University-School-Business Collaboration

Collaboration is and has been the key source of the project's strength. The University of South Carolina's College of Education initiated the process by proposing the use of the Salkehatchie Consortium's network of school districts as an arena for engaging teacers, school leaders, parents, citizens, and business in designing and implementing a teacher-parent partnership program for young children. Significant elements of this collaborative approach have emerged during the first year of the program: **the University is** providing direction, training, resources, and research support; **the Consortium is** contributing space for training, continuing monitoring of project activities, and other needed resources; **IBM has** provided consulting, training, and other support; **teachers and parents are** putting in many volunteer hours for training and curriculum work; and **the advisory council is** acting to guide the program in positive directions.

The Children's Center As Demonstrator

The University of South Carolina's Children's Center is carrying out a unique function by developing and demonstrating key parts of the project as they are implemented in the schools. Curriculum development, field testing of parent education programs, development of parent-oriented education videotapes, piloting of home learning strategies, development of computer training modules, and sharing of resources are some of the many activities the Center has carried out thus far. Eventually the Center will model the practice developed in the project and act to demonstrate and disseminate them to other schools and early childhood programs.

Toward The Future

The long-term goal of the **Teacher-Parent Partnership Project** is to create a system by which schools can introduce the concept of school-family learning practices at the very outset of the child's educational experience. The project advisory council as well as participating teachers and school leaders are taking note of the impact of high parent involvement on children's learning and on the very structure of early schooling. **Plans for the future include**: development of a parent education/family support component for the preschool years; exploring the potential of a new paraprofessional role in schools--**the home-school-worker**; expanding the **key role of technology in the teaching-learning process**; continued development of strategies for reaching at-risk families; and a system and resources for expanding the program's reach to other schools.